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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the extent to which nonstandard forms of written English create for readers stereotypes of the writer's personality. To determine the extent to which nonstandard writing is apparent to speakers of standard and nonstandard English, and to what extent such writing represents a socioeconomic liability for the writer, two questionnaires were devised. Respondents were first asked to rate a series of short passages on a common theme against a checklist of traits designed to reveal their idea of each writer's personality, family background, educational level, ability to use language, and potential for success. The second questionnaire used the same checklist, but the texts were not controlled for theme. The stereotypical profiles resulting from the analysis of responses show that language standardization does not necessarily correlate with favorable ratings. Passages rated best in terms of standard composition categories are not necessarily rated well in traits indicating their personal appeal to the audience. The presence of syntactic or dictional complexity seems to suggest to many respondents the presence of standard forms, although such complexities are often nonstandard. Problems in mastering the conventions of the written standard code and the resulting breakdowns in communication between author and reader were examined. (Author/CLK)

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Reactions to Written Non-Standard English: Toward a Formal Description of the Written Code of Non-Standard English

Dennis E. Baron

People are quick to make judgments about language.* We base our opinions of others on their accent and diction, at the same time seeking their approval of our own speech. We tend to stereotype people according to their use of language, assessing the background, personality, and future behavior of a speaker, revealing our own linguistic prejudices and insecurities.[1] We are conditioned by schooling and the print culture to judge writing even more harshly than speech. Non-Standard writing is not only considered by many to be less acceptable than Non-Standard speech, it is also considered as more direct evidence of the inability to think or to perform other innately human functions.

This study investigates the extent to which Non-Standard

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*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Dialect Society (Northeast) Regional Meeting at The Pennsylvania State University in 1974.

forms of written English create for readers a stereotype of the writer's personality. In order to determine to what extent Non-Standard writing is apparent to speakers of Standard and Non-Standard English, and to what extent its use is a liability for the writer, I have devised two questionnaires which test emotional response to varieties of written English. In the first, respondents are asked to read a series of short, descriptive essays on a common theme, written in language varying from monolithic Standard to fairly deviant Non-Standard. They are then asked to rate the passages against a checklist of traits designed to reveal their idea of each writer's personality, family background, educational level, ability to use language, and potential for success. The essays, presented in their entirety, were written by college freshmen, aged 17 to 45, as a fifty-minute in-class assignment specifically for the questionnaire. In an effort to neutralize the effect of content on the reader, a common, uncontroversial (yet potentially interesting) theme was chosen: I asked for a description of the television show, Let's Make a Deal. Four essays, exhibiting various types of deviation from Standard written English, were chosen from the batch. The most Standard essay, the second, was doctored slightly to standardize spelling and punctuation (but not syntax or diction); the others are presented in unedited form.

The second questionnaire is not controlled as to topic. It consists of a series of short excerpts from student compo-

sitions and term papers. The excerpts exhibit deviations from standard language that are due to both dialectal and rhetorical processes; selections B and D are from the work of the same student. None of the passages has been tampered with. Passage C is by a freshman, the others are by juniors and seniors.

The rating sheet, the same for both questionnaires, is divided into three sections. The first deals with background information: age, sex, ethnicity, educational level and record, and employability. The second contains a list of pairs of traits relating to personality and communicative success. The final section asks respondents to indicate the types of errors likely to be made by each writer.

A number of problems became apparent at the outset. It was not possible to present selections of any great length and still be able to include a sufficient number of samples in the survey to insure a basis for comparison. It was difficult to find short passages which contain a sufficient number of noticeable but unobtrusive features. It was also difficult for respondents to formalize their emotional reactions to the kind of non-fiction writing presented, since they have been trained in schools to respond to it only with their logical faculties, reserving emotion for fiction. Even professional composition raters (i.e., English teachers) had difficulty dealing with the parameters measured in section two of the rating sheet.

The observations I will make about the questionnaire results are only preliminary and tentative. The number and kind of respondents must be increased, and the rating system (particularly for section three) must be refined before more definite results can be obtained. Some of the categories rated provided little or no information. There is a tendency, for example, to rate all the writers as intelligent, educated, and friendly. Before eliminating these categories from future surveys, it must be determined to what extent the response obtained is a function of the audience surveyed: student respondents overwhelmingly rated all the writers as honest, but responding teachers almost unanimously rated the writer of 2A as dishonest. Very few respondents rated a writer as unemployable, even when they indicated negative responses for most of the other categories. I have yet to survey a group not connected with an educational institution -- it is quite possible that members of this group would be more willing to down-rate writers in categories involving success in the real world.

Some categories produced unexpected results. I had anticipated that the sex rating would serve as a neutral, introductory category, producing only random results; but this was not the case. For the first questionnaire, the writers of A and B were considered probably female, and C and D probably male. Students saw the writer of 2C as being either male or female, and teachers felt the writer of 2B was more likely female--all the other writers in the second questionnaire were

considered to be male. Some of the reasoning behind these choices is interesting. In discussing the questionnaire, one male student felt that the term 'chicken coop' in 1B was more likely to be used by a male; another male felt that the use of 'a bit' as a qualifier in 2A, although a prominent feature of his own style, was definitely a feminine characteristic. Although 2A and 2C received the most favorable responses from students, it is not possible to conclude that sexual attribution has a simple correlation with the other categories: for the first questionnaire the sexes shared favorable and unfavorable ratings, and for teachers responding to the second questionnaire, the passage judged most likely to be feminine received the lowest grades.

Some patterns of correlation do emerge in the responses to each questionnaire. In the first, writers of passages A and C generally received more negative ratings and lower marks, while writers of passages B and D tended to have more positive ratings and slightly higher marks. Distinctions between positive and negative ratings were more clear-cut for the second questionnaire, where passages A and C were definitely rated more favorably than B and D in most categories. Writers receiving negative ratings tended to be judged as younger and at a correspondingly lower educational level than those receiving positive ratings. A similar tendency occurred in assigning ethnicity to writers. Passage 1A was felt to be by a Black, while 1B was strongly felt to be by a white. 1C and

D were rated as white by a slight majority. In the second questionnaire, passages B and D, which received strongly unfavorable ratings, were felt to be by Blacks, Spanish, or "Others," while passage A, receiving the strongest positive reactions, was almost universally attributed to a white. C, also receiving favorable ratings, was fairly evenly divided between white and Black, and received almost no Spanish or "Other" votes.

In their discussions of the age and ethnic categories, many students indicated their surprise when told all the writers were in college and were native speakers of American English. One group expressed the belief that the "poorer" passages had been written by children or those less familiar with the English language. Because of this belief, they said, they had been more generous in their ratings than they would have been had they known the true identities of the writers. Despite this disclaimer, written ratings seemed to be milder than verbal responses even when respondents were told in advance that the writers were all college level native speakers of American English. Although initial assessments were often harsh, e.g., "How can someone who writes like that get into college?" (this from open admissions students!), their written responses indicated a much more tolerant attitude toward language use.

Complicating the evaluation of sex and ethnic ratings was the fact that no correlation was made in the questionnaires between the sex and ethnic background of the respondent and her/his response to the passages. A number of respondents

were not native speakers of American English, and this no doubt affected their response in a way that the questionnaire was not able to measure.

A few of the personality traits did not follow the general trends. Most student respondents rated 2A as dull, disorganized, formal, and precise, while teachers rated it dull, organized, formal, and imprecise. The apparent distinction between organization and precision is not entirely a result of averaging responses together: contradictions appeared in many of the individual ratings. Students seemed to react to the high style diction of the passage as evidence of precision, and its meaninglessness as lack of organization. Teachers regarded the diction as pretentious and vague, but recognized some sort of argumentative structure underlying the flashy syntax.

In summarizing the ratings, it becomes clear that the patterns emerging are significant despite the small sample of responses analyzed so far. The contradictions made in individual ratings indicate respondents are not automatically matching their responses to initial judgments they have made about the passages. Respondents omitted categories they found impossible or objectionable -- some refused, on principle, to assess the sex or ethnic background of the writers. A number of respondents indicated that the subject matter interfered with their judgments in the second questionnaire. One student, for example, said that while 2A was well-written, he could not give it positive ratings because he did not like Shakespeare.

Another felt that, although he honestly believed the writer of 2B was a pre-teenager, he could not rate him as such because no one that age would be reading Siddhartha.

The stereotypical profiles created by the questionnaires do not seem to be overly influenced either by a literal interpretation of the passage or by an undue attention to linguistic detail. Nor is it clear that standardization of language correlates with favorable ratings. Of the two favored passages in the first questionnaire, B is matter of fact and formal, while D is conversational in tone. Both were rated as relaxed and interesting, but B was considered unfriendly, trite, and organized, while D was rated friendly, innovative, and disorganized. D, which is considerably less standard in its language than B, received a higher average grade. While respondents may recognize standard language, they do not necessarily approve of it.

The writers of 1A and 1C, which received generally unfavorable ratings, were judged as careless, lazy, illogical, illiterate, unsuccessful, and likely to be poor speakers. The writer of 1A was judged as sloppy and unintelligent, ambitious, confident, dull, and formal, while the writer of 1C was seen as unambitious, disorganized, hesitant, interesting, educated, and relaxed. 1A was given an average grade of C (only points below the C+ of 1D), while 1C received an average grade of D. Yet passage C is more standard and considerably less complex, syntactically, than passage A, which does not make lit-

eral syntactic sense. 1C produced the greatest range of grades for the first questionnaire: its assigned grades ranged from A to F (although most were D's), while those of 1A clustered more closely around C. In order to make a more precise assessment of the rating system it may be necessary to develop individual profiles for each response and compare these; however, that is beyond the scope of the present inquiry.

In the second questionnaire, the writers of passages B and D averaged marks of C, but again the grade spread for D was wide, with a number of B's and F's, while 2B clustered much closer to C (both for students and teachers). These writers were judged careless, lazy, unsuccessful, and likely to be poor speakers. In addition, the writer of 2D was considered less friendly and interesting, and more precise, confident, and likely to speak well, than the writer of 2B. In fact, the passages are by the same writer, taken from two different sections of the same in-class essay, yet they are different enough to fool the respondents. Most students rated the writers of 2B and 2D as non-white; all of the teachers did.

A surprising development, to me, was the high number of favorable ratings received by 2C, a passage with considerable surface confusion making little syntactic sense. In terms of grade spread and average it did as well as 2A, which is considerably more standard in its syntax but which makes just as little sense. The writer of 2A was judged neater, more successful, and more likely to speak well, while the writer of 2C was seen as more interesting and more relaxed. The

latter was also judged more likely to be Black and unconditionally employable. Students tended to feel all the writers in the second questionnaire were innovative; teachers felt they were trite.

The results of the questionnaires indicate a number of things about the perception of and reaction to Standard and Non-Standard forms of English. For one thing, passages rated as "best" in terms of standard composition categories, e.g., logic, care, and precision, are not necessarily rated well in traits indicating their personal appeal to the audience, e.g., friendliness, interest, and honesty. Many respondents perceive not a Standard form of English, but an idea or approximation of the Standard, and react accordingly. Thus for many respondents the presence of syntactic or dictional complexity (which they have noticed in writing that has been presented to them as a model of standard writing) indicates that the passage they are rating is well-written, although analysis of the passages in the questionnaires indicates it is actually a sign of deviation from the standard forms of language.

A consideration of some of the Non-Standard features encountered in writing can help to illuminate some of the reactions we have observed. There have been a few attempts to show how features of Black Idiom are transcribed in student compositions,[2] but dialect alone cannot account for all the differences we find between Standard and Non-Standard writing.

The last passage in the second questionnaire contains a number of features that are characteristic of spoken Black Idiom: loss of final unstressed syllables, loss of final 's', regularization of irregular verb forms. But in the second passage, the same writer, who is Black, employs forms much closer to the Standard, and his spoken language indicates that he is perfectly capable of employing the Standard, formal language of the academy. Similarly, the writer of 2C uses a perfectly acceptable brand of Standard Middlewestern English in his speech.

We observe that many speakers of what can be classed as Standard English often seem to lose control of that dialect once pen touches paper. There are a number of factors which cause this Jeckyll and Hyde behavior. In schools, we continually place the language of our students on trial. Everything they say, from an extemporaneous discourse on "What I would do if I were Oedipus" to a request to leave the room, comes under the scrutiny of the English teacher. Consequently students' language undergoes what I have called the EGO REDUCTION transformation.[3] Students try to evade responsibility for their own statements by hiding behind elaborately constructed passives and indirect questions. In later life, they still panic when they come up against their erstwhile tormentors. We should all recognize the phenomenon described by Donald Hall in his poem, "To a Waterfowl," He tells us about businessmen on airplanes,

> who close their briefcases and ask, "What are <u>you</u> in?"
> I look in their eyes, I tell them I am in poetry,

and their eyes fill with anxiety, and with little tears.
"Oh, yeah?" they say, developing an interest in clouds.
"My wife, she likes that sort of thing? Hah-hah?
I guess maybe I'd better watch my grammar, huh?"
I leave them in airports, watching their grammar."[4]

Writing provides even more of a language confrontation in school than speech, and many of the Non-Standard forms we find in written composition can be attributed to differences between the spoken and written communication acts as well as to differences in dialect. For one thing, writing is an exercise in apostrophe. While in speech we can usually get some sort of feedback from a listener to indicate the success of our communication, in writing we must assume the role of listener as well as speaker, audience as well as writer. In order to insure against undue interference from communications noise, we must calculate, without the feedback from a normal speech event, the intelligibility and the effect of the message for the audience.

Writers employ global constraints, schemes of organization and development, in order to formalize written communication and minimize intereference with comprehension. Although such schemes are also present in spoken communications, we find that a greater amount of interference with global constraints is tolerated in the spoken code; even in a highly formal lecture or performance situation, the audience is permitted to interrupt, and the speaker to stray from, a preplanned discourse. In writing, we are required by the standard code to keep to the point so that the audience will not

lose the thread of the argument.

The requirement of prejudging the effect of a piece of writing is more difficult for speakers of Non-Standard English because no formal standard written code exists for their language. They must create a written code for what has been a primarily non-literate dialect, or they must imitate the Standard English code. This is not to say that speakers of Standard English do not write. Rather, they have not generally been encouraged to use their native speech in writing the sorts of extended compositions required in school, and, to a more limited extent, in the business world. They are capable of communicating the same sorts of information as those using the standard dialect. Attempts to write poetry, prose fiction, and scholarly essays in Black Idiom demonstrate this clearly, and indicate there is a sizable group of people willing to accept non-standard writing as a viable form of communication. In most instances, however, Non-Standard speakers are in social positions which prohibit them from making such communications, or their efforts are ignored or disparaged by elite speakers. They are, then, forced to translate their spoken dialect into Standard written English. Labov comments that "whenever a speaker of nonstandard dialect is in a subordinate position to a speaker of standard dialect, the rules of his grammar will shift in an unpredictable manner toward the standard." 5 In other words, some features of discourse will reflect characteristics of the Non-Standard dialect, while others will reflect the Standard or what the speaker thinks is Standard,

and hypercorrection will result.

The situation becomes more complex when we deal with writing. Even speakers of Standard dialect tend to exhibit chronic hypercorrection due to lack of familiarity with the requirements of the Standard written code.

Many of the deviations from Standard written English that we find indicate the writer is making a phonological transcription of speech, e.g.:

> (1) Eighth-grade pupil Richard Rogers smiled and said: "Some commuters even tell us they're for the car pools 'because they'll be less traffic when I drive to work.'" (Boston Globe)
>
> (2) He is a newly graduate of Yale and is trying to make some sought of name for himself. (Student final examination)

What is unusual about the passage from the Globe is that the phrase they'll (for SE there'll), although a quote within a quote, is a transcription of speech, not a copy of a written message; it represents the dialect of the reporter rather than that of the pupil or the commuter, and has unconsciously slipped into the Standard English environment of the newspaper. In (2), sought for sort is a reflection of the writer's r-less New York City dialect. I have even found an occurrence of the increasingly popular should of (for SE should've) in print, in the Sunday Comics section of the Champaign-Urbana

Courier, where, as with (1), it appeared in an unquestionably Standard context, and again in a poem by Tom Clark.

Just as phonological change proceeds from Non-Standard to Standard dialect (e.g., the recent month-long tirade of Febuary on Walter Cronkite's news show), phonological transcription in Non-Standard writing can serve as a means of introducing change in the written Standard. Appearances of a form in a semi-legitimate print medium, e.g. compositions, advertisements, traffic signs, may eventually be followed by the adoption of the form in more Standard environments. Traffic signs spread the use of thru for through; television listings encourage nite for night. Newspapers, closer to the Standard than student compositions, print tho and altho for though and although (Chicago Tribune), and alright for all right (Boston Globe). The following, from the Globe, is an indication of what may eventually become acceptable journalistic prose:

> (3) Briton's farmers were highly annoyed. Milkers would have to milk in the dark and harvesters could not make hay until the sun shined away the dew. But Parliament like the device and renewed it time and time again.

A feature often associated with the formal requirements of standard language is sentence complexity. Thus common

troublespots for writers are the formation of compound tenses and sentence conjoining:

> (4) A list of words that you will never find in a dictionary and may never will. (Student term paper)
> (5) Good literature often presents the reader with a guide for living by the means of which the author uses the story as an example of a particular philosophy not necessarily his own. (Student term paper)

In (4) what at first seems to be a simple redundancy of future tenses creating syntactic confusion becomes clear if we recognize that the language is not to be taken literally. The first VP is a present tense indicating a durative aspect, while the second is meant as a future conditional.

Despite the non-standard means of conjoining sentences and the resulting ungainly diction of (5), the meaning of the passage is clear to everyone except the adamantly literal-minded. Communication has occurred, and it is useless, in a sense, for a writing teacher to insist the writer revise to assure communication to a less demanding audience.

In permitting phonological transcription and hypercorrection in imitating syntactic complexity, the Non-Standard written code allows greater interference with global constraints than does the Standard. Noise potential is higher for the Non-Standard code because prescriptive grammatical and stylistic rules may be applied haphazardly, by both reader and writer.

As with speech, neither phonological transcription (i.e., the written counterpart of accent) nor hypercorrection provides a significant obstacle to interpretation. Failure of communication, more often than not, results from the audience's refusal to understand a form of discourse it finds esthetically objectionable and not from the writer's failure to minimize noise in the communication channel.

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Notes

[1]For example, G. Richard Tucker and Wallace E. Lambert, "White and Negro Listeners' Reactions to Various American-English Dialects," Social Forces, 47: 463-68, rpt. in Bailey, R.W. and Robinson, J., Varieties of Present-Day English (New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 293-301.

[2]For example, Richard W. Bailey, "Write Off vs. Write On: Dialects and the Teaching of Composition," in Bailey and Robinson, pp. 384-408.

[3]In "Non-Standard English, Composition, and the Academic Establishment," a paper presented at the ADS (Midwest) Regional Meeting in Ann Arbor, August, 1973.

[4]Donald Hall, "To a Waterfowl," in American Poetry Review, Vol. 2, No. 6, p. 1.

[5]William Labov, "The Study of Nonstandard English," in _____ language, ed. V.P. Clark, P.A. Eschholz, and A.F. Rosa (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972), p. 394.

Texts for Questionnaire I

The passages were selected from the work of various students at various levels; all were asked to describe how the television game show, Let's Make a Deal, works.

A. I've seen the show "Lets Make a Deal." I'm not sure about the rules, but here goes. First I suppose names are summited to the program and the earliest postmark is chosen for current show. When the show comes on I've observed (2) that the majority of the people dress in weird ways. The weirder the costume the better. (3) Keep the participant in a state of suspense, whereby different ones are asked to do certain things. Whats behind the curtain, in the box, how much money in coat pocket. If you don't take whats behind the curtain I'll give you the contents of this envelope. Some chose what's behind the curtain sometimes by choosing one or the other you've either lost or won a nice prize. I don't like this show. People are made to look ridiculous. They'll do anything to get something for nothing.

B. This is a television game show where people can win anything from a chicken coop to a car. These people are picked from the audience each day. When a deal is made the person may have two or three things to choose from. All in all, these people must be witty and perceptive if they want to win something. Greedy people usually get zonked. That is when they always go for the bigger box. When they do, they end up with things like a giant baby carriage or a camel instead of a $1000 bill or a mink jacket.

C. The contestants come dressed up of anything their imagination can think of so that their costume would attrack more attention and they get chosen for the deals.

Some people come dressed up as bananas, tables, animals, that make them look even weirder than they are, and bring all kinds of posters and start to shout.

When they are chosen they get hysterical and start crying, jumping, and laughing and you get all kinds of emotions at the same time.

D. First; in order to be one of the participants you must be dressed like a clown, which shows you're really hard up for the prizes.

Second; if you are among the lucky ones to be selected by Monte Hall you get to "make a deal." There are about ten lucky people selected from the crowd of people screaming such things as, "Monte, Montee, Monteeeee, Please me, Oh, me, ect."

Now here's where the dealmaking come in. You get something from Monte but you don't know what and he will offer to trade you something for your newly acquired "you don't know what" such as money or merchandise. Usually there is a decrepancy in the values of choices if your lucky you come out with higher valued prize.

Texts for Questionnaire II

The passages were selected from the work of various students at various levels; they are discussing works of literature that they have read, and are selections from longer compositions.

A. With Shakespeare, the matter is a bit more simple. When we come to Shakespears, we realize at once that King Lear is the masterpiece of his cannon, just as we realize instinctively that it is the masterpiece of all dramatic literature. We may admire any other of his poems or plays; we may detect something in them that has heretofore remained hidden from literary criticism. But, again, such discoveries take on their final significance only insofar as we recognize them as belonging initially to the world in which King Lear takes place.

B. His best friend Govinda find a system of belief and lifes by it. Everyone Siddhartha meets has found his spot in life, Kamala, his Father, the merchants and Govinda but not Siddhartha. All he had learned went in one ear and out the other. Siddhartha's world with the absents of violence gives Siddhartha the freedom to wander and think. He never had to worry about the simple thing like food, a place to live, or water. He never had to worry about a tiger eating him in the dark forest. The author left these things out so tha Siddhartha could be happy go lucky.

C. In my opinion, Thoreau was a man who was able to relate to the life-style the United States was based upon but unable to live under the conditions the society had set out for itself. His basic principles and dreams are those regarding the morals and true consciences of his fellow-men. The people are machines ruled by their heads and not emotions. Hence, the common people are made the slaves of their government and political organization.

D. In the Outsider by Richard Wright the author set-up and imaginary world which focus it attention on how our system of thinking can entrap us in certain situation. How extreme beliefs gives to extreme behavior. In his book all of his character are control by their system of thoughts. If a person view the world as a dog eat dog existence, then his behavior is, in effect responsing to his belief in a dog eat dog image.

Rating Sheet

I. Background and Status:

Select the appropriate description of the writer of this passage from the following categories.

____ Sex: a. male b. female
____ Age: a. 8-12 b. 13-16 c. 17-21 d. over 21
____ Ethnicity: a. white b. black c. spanish d. other
____ Educational level: a. elementary b. high school c. (some) college
____ School record: a. good b. fair c. poor d. failing
____ Employability: a. employable b. conditionally employable (for limited skill jobs) c. unemployable

II. Personality:

Choose the appropriate trait from each pair. Try to rate the writer's personality rather than the quality of his composition.

	a	b
____	unintelligent	intelligent
____	careful	careless
____	ambitious	not ambitious
____	sensitive	not sensitive
____	logical	illogical
____	disorganized	organized
____	conscientious	lazy
____	neat	sloppy
____	precise	imprecise
____	sincere	insincere
____	unfriendly	friendly
____	dishonest	honest
____	confident	hesitant
____	interesting	dull
____	illiterate	educated
____	successful	unsuccessful
____	authoritative	uninformed
____	relaxed	formal
____	probably speaks well	probably speaks poorly
____	trite	innovative

III. Errors:

Everyone makes mistakes when writing. Assuming each writer makes 10 "errors", how many of each of the following error types will the writer of this passage make? (Some errors may fit more than one type)

____ Errors in spelling and punctuation
____ Errors due to limited ability to communicate ideas.
____ Errors due to carelessness or lack of time
____ Errors that are "acceptable" in speech but not in writing
____ Errors in content and organization
____ Errors due to inappropriate style or word choice
____ Errors due to ignorance of correct grammar.

____ An English teacher should give this writer A,B,C,D,F. (choose one)